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AUTHOR de Souza, Doralice Lange
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ABSTRACT

Physical education classes are usually seen as the least politicized of all disciplines in schools. This paper gives examples of how to promote critical thinking in physical education classes, transforming them into a forum of critical reflection about corporeal culture. Even though the main goal of physical education classes is to promote physical development and to develop life-long habits of doing physical activities on a regular basis, these classes need to reflect on, and be critical of, aspects of the culture in general and of corporeal culture more specifically. The goal of this paper is to give some examples of how to do this in practice. Physical education classes can foster intellectual development and critical thinking as students learn to understand and use corporeal movement as a form of language; as they study the history of certain forms of sports, martial arts, dance, and gymnastics; and as they participate in discussions about the political implications that might be involved in these practices. (LB)

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DEVELOPING A CRITICAL CURRICULUM IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES

BY DORALICE LANGE DE SOUZA

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Introduction:

Physical education classes are usually seen as the least politicized of all disciplines in schools. But this reality can be different. In this paper, I will give some examples of how we can promote critical thinking in physical education classes, transforming them into a forum of critical reflection about corporeal culture: a place in which we not only practice physical activities but also reflect on corporeal practices as fruits of a history and a culture that gives them shape[1].

On the building of a more critical physical education practice

When we think about physical education classes, we usually think of people running, jumping, playing volleyball, basketball, soccer, etc. After all, physical education classes generally provide the only place in the context of the school where we can learn how to use some of our physical capabilities, where we can move around, and where we can let our physical energy out and enjoy the fact that we have a body (in other classes we are usually forced to sit still for hours and hours as if we were disembodied beings). I believe that even though the main goal of physical education classes is to promote physical development and to develop life-long habits of doing physical activities on a regular basis, we also need to think of these classes as a place to reflect on, and be critical of, aspects of our culture in general and of corporeal culture more specifically. The goal of this paper is to give some examples of how we can do this in practice[2].

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[1] See Bracht et al. (1992) for a discussion of this concept in the Brazilian context.

[2] Some of the examples that will be given below are drawn from my own experience as a physical education teacher in Brazil.

As we develop various types of physical activities, we can foster in students the awareness that forms of body movement and concepts of corporeal beauty, like any other type of knowledge, are a social construction. As Bracht et al. (1992) remark, "We were not born jumping, skipping, throwing, balancing, playing games, etc. All these physical activities were built in certain historical periods, as answers to certain stimuli, challenges, and human needs." (p.39) (my translation). As students become more aware of this fact we can also help them realize that, because forms of movement and concepts of corporeal beauty are social constructions, they can also be deconstructed, questioned, reformulated, and replaced.

One way of helping students understand this idea of social construction is to have them do some research on images of the body and on physical practices in different historical times and different cultures. We can then lead discussions about what seems appropriate in terms of body image and behavior in different historical periods and in various cultural contexts, including our own. When we talk about out own culture, we can generate conversations on topics such as: (1) the mechanisms the dominant society uses to force certain ideas about our body on us (e.g. how the media fosters the idea that beautiful is being slim, blond, tall, and having blue eyes); (2) the problems generated by the overemphasis on body image (e.g. how physical appearance often weighs more than character and skills in being able to land a job); (3) the effects of certain concepts of beauty on people's well being (e.g. how some people starve themselves and take harmful drugs to produce a body that fits these concepts); (4) the commodification of the body (e.g. how images of people's bodies--especially women's bodies--are used to sell products); (5) the view of the body as a machine (e.g. how we tend to treat the body as a machine that needs to work around the clock to serve one's own mind or somebody else's mind); (5) the effects of this view on our heath (e.g. how we tend to neglect our very basic needs to eat well, to exercise on a regular basis and to rest) and on how we are treated by doctors when we manifest health

problems (e.g. how they usually treat parts of our body as if they were isolated from each other rather than focusing on our organism as a whole).

We can help students to understand that movement is a form of language (Bracht et al., 1992), and, being so, it carries within it a form of symbolic representation of the world. We can teach them how to decode this language system so that they might better understand how other people use it and how they themselves can use it to communicate their feelings and ideas through their bodies. One way of fostering corporeal literacy is to promote activities that involve dance and mimicry, considering that, as they do these activities, students can be asked to interpret the meaning of the corporeal movements of others and to express themselves through physical movements. Another way of promoting cultural literacy is to use the activities proposed above as a springboard for a discussion of how some people use their body--their physical abilities and strength--to silence and to dominate other people.

We can help students develop self-knowledge and self-control through physical activities that promote self-reflection and self-discipline. Activities such as yoga, martial arts, and dance are especially helpful in promoting these goals. Self-knowledge and self-control are extremely important so that we will know what our real needs are and will be able to withstand the pressure to abandon them for the artificial needs imposed on us by the dominant culture.

As students play games, we can ask them to think about the rules they are using, and whether these rules discriminate against certain students. For example, some games exclude the less able participants from the beginning. In this context, we can encourage students to critically challenge the rules of the game and to find new ways of playing it so that participants will not be eliminated (Bracht et al., 1992). When this happens, we can

also talk with students about the "regulations" that exclude people from the "game" in the world outside school. For instance, we can discuss the problem of people who do not have the chance to go to a good school and find a well paying job because they grow up in unfavorable economic conditions, or the problem of those who cannot get a good job only because of their gender, race, age, ethnic background or sexual orientation.

We can explore more cooperative rather than competitive games. For instance, we can promote games in which students are asked to complete an obstacle course in the least time on the condition that they should all reach the end together. In this type of assignment, students will not compete against each other but instead collaborate so that they can reach a common goal. The experience of working together with different students might help them to understand that each individual has gifts and limitations, and that a problem-solving process, in some circumstances, can be much richer when we work collaboratively rather than individually.

We can stimulate discussions about sexism in sports and other physical activities. For instance, we can discuss why women have been traditionally excluded from participation in certain sporting events and what we can do to end this type of prejudice against women. Just as important as promoting discussions, we should also foster women's physical skills and determination so that they can use their bodies in ways they feel are appropriate and dispel the idea that women by nature are fragile beings.

We can draw students' attention to the historical and cultural background behind any structured type of movement--dance, sports, gymnastics, martial arts, etc.--we are teaching in our classes (Bracht et al., 1992). Let me quote one example of how this could be done if

we were to soccer in the Brazilian context[3]: (1) We could examine soccer's history (Bracht et al., 1992), how it was brought from England and was practiced only by the elite at the beginning of the century, and how the working classes had to fight for access to the sport, since the police would not permit the game in public spaces. (2) We could review how soccer players in the early 1930s, especially players from the lower social classes, fought to professionalize soccer so they could receive money to play and have as much time to train as their colleagues from higher social classes who did not have to work. (3) We could talk about how Afro-Brazilians had to struggle to be admitted into professional clubs and how some of them would use powder to appear whiter so that they could play. (This is how Fluminense, one of our most famous soccer teams, got its nickname "Pó de arroz," which means "rice powder[4]"). (4) We could analyze the poor working conditions of most professional soccer players who are treated like merchandise as they are sold from team to team (Bracht et al., 1992). (5) We could consider the corruption in soccer clubs, and how the soccer "Mafia" forces club administrators to buy and/or sell their players, and how they bribe players to physically and morally hurt their adversaries, and/or to miss goals and lose games (Bracht et al., 1992). (6) We could analyze why women were not allowed to play soccer professionally until a few years ago. (7) We could inquire into what makes soccer a phenomenon that fascinates millions of people all around the world (Bracht et al., 1992); (8) We could analyze how politicians use soccer to promote themselves and their ideas, and how the government can use it to divert and silence people. For instance, we could teach about how the military government promoted soccer to its advantage. They did it to such an extent that the whole nation stopped to watch the games and to celebrate each of the Brazilian team's victories. While people were watching and celebrating the games, the military were torturing, killing, and exiling thousands of people. (9) We could examine the

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[3] I am going to focus a great part of my discussion on soccer because of its widespread popularity and importance in the social and political scenario in Brazil.

fact that, even though soccer can be used to manipulate, it can also be used by people as a means to get together and organize to make sure their voice is heard. (10) We could also talk about the power of soccer to mobilize and unite thousands of people in popular events in which they get together to watch the games and to celebrate their team victories, regardless of their color, ethnicity, gender, class, religion and age.

Conclusion

In contradiction to the commonly accepted belief that the nature of physical education classes is to be apolitical and exclusively about physical development, physical education classes can also foster intellectual development and critical thinking as students learn to understand and use corporeal movement as a form of language; as they learn about the history of certain forms of sports, martial arts, dance, and gymnastics; and as they participate in discussions about the political implications that might be involved in these cultural practices.

The examples of activities suggested above are meant to be only suggestions. It is my belief that it is only in the flow of our classes that we can decide what exactly the particular group of students we are working with need the most. Once we become better critical thinkers ourselves, it will become more easy for us to realize what exactly our students need and how to develop and implement activities that can promote critical thinking. The trick is, in my point of view, to find the right balance between actually doing physical activities and encouraging the types of reflections suggested above. We do not want to become too theoretical considering that physical education classes are the only instances in

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[4] The historical data presented on items 1,2 and 3 were compiled in the book "O negro no futebol brasileiro" by Mario Filho.

the school context in which we can cultivate students' physical development and their taste for doing physical activities on a regular basis. On the other hand, we do not want to let go of the opportunity to use our classes as an arena to discuss with them the political implications of physical practices.

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